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Structural and Contextual Factors Regarding the Accessibility of Elective Office for Women of Color at the Local Level

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ABSTRACT

Different from the majority of past research on gender gaps in political officeholding, we adopt an intersectionality framework and move beyond traditional individual factors to explore what implications certain elements in the political opportunity structure may have for women and men of color elected officials serving in county, municipal, and local school board offices. We argue that structural and contextual factors, such as type of institutions, election systems, and jurisdictional racial makeup, may influence the calculations women of color make concerning the accessibility of elective office. Using data from the Gender and Multiracial Leadership (GMCL) project, we find county offices to be the least, and seats on school boards the most, accessible to women of color. Of the types of electoral arrangements, we find multimember districts (MMD) to be the most significant variable predicting the likelihood of women of color in office. Although both Black and Latina women benefit from having a significant share of coethnics or nonwhites in jurisdictions, the two groups of women have an opposite relationship to their racial constituent makeup than that held by their male counterparts.

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality; local elective office; gender gap; political ambition; political opportunity structure

Introduction

Scholars have long noted the severe underrepresentation of US women in elective offices. In seeking to explain this gender gap, past research focused on individual-level factors and relied heavily on the experiences of white women at the national level. The study presented here adopts an intersectionality framework and moves beyond traditional individual factors by asking whether certain elements of the political opportunity structure are more women friendly than others. We argue that structure and context matter, for they influence the perception of accessibility to elective offices which, in turn, affects the incidence of women's officeholding. By accessibility, we mean a variety of factors identified in prior research that influence women's decisions to run for public office. Women and minorities may

perceive offices that are low in competition or cost, have a higher share of women holding office, or have job descriptions that are considered more amenable to women's capabilities and policy orientations to be more accessible and open to their candidacies. For example, Lublin and Brewer (2003) find that women hold few executive level offices and are instead more likely to win offices that are relatively undesirable, whereas Fox and Oxley (2003) find that women are less likely to run for offices that are inconsistent with their stereotypical strengths and weaknesses. On the contextual side, Palmer and Simon (2010) find that certain demographic features can make districts more women friendly, and demographic considerations may be particularly salient for women of color who sit at the intersection of race and gender. Using data from the Gender and Multiracial Leadership (GMCL) project, one of our main tasks is to identify the type of electoral arrangement that would be most amenable to explain the incidence of women of color in office.

American women were systematically excluded from the realm of politics. Their entry into the political realm was virtually blocked because of cultural norms and gender stereotypes that cast politics as the domain of men and therefore as a place unfit for women. Women who did seek entry into the political realm faced the social and psychological penalties that accompany nonconformity (Palmer and Simon 2008, 4). Historically, women were confronted with unsupportive party leaders, were not recruited to serve in elective office, had their candidacies used as sacrificial lambs, and suffered from a lack of campaign contributions (Thomas 2005, 7). The legacy of women's exclusion from politics endures and continues to have an impact today. For example, Sanbonmatsu (2006) finds that at the state level, women continue to be disadvantaged during the candidate recruitment process vis-à-vis men. Existing networks of electoral gatekeepers remain male dominated, and it is from those male-dominated networks that candidates are identified and recruited. Fox and Lawless's (2010a) 2008 national survey of "potential candidates"—men and women identified as well positioned to serve in future elective office—likewise reveals that equally situated women are less likely to be recruited by all political actors, are less likely to be recruited by multiple sources, and are recruited less intensely.

Besides facing the issue of severe underrepresentation by gender, the vast majority of US women who make it into elective offices are white. For example, of the 98 women who hold seats in the 113th Congress, 30 are women of color and women of color constitute only 4.5 percent of the total 535 members of Congress (Center for American Women and Politics 2013). Similar findings hold at the state level where 22.6 percent of the 7,383 state legislators in the United States in 2013 are women, and their numbers have largely plateaued following more dramatic growth in the 1970s and 1980s (Center for American Women and Politics 2013). Currently, there are 1,788 women serving in state legislatures, 368 of which (20.6 percent) are women

of color. In total, women of color constitute only 5 percent of all US state legislators (Center for American Women and Politics 2013). Similar findings hold when examining the number of women mayors. Focusing on the local level, the Center for American Women and Politics reports that as of 2013, women served as mayors of only 17.4 percent of US cities with populations of 30,000 or more. A mere 12 women serve as mayors of the 100 largest US cities; only two are women of color. In their study using the GMCL database, Lien and Swain (2013) find that among the 148 women of color mayors identified nationwide in 2007, 62 percent served in cities with a population of less than 5,000. These women constituted 21 percent of the US population of nonwhite mayors then, a percentage that is close to the 22 percent female reported by Dolan, Deckman, and Swers (2010, 191) among US city councilmembers in 2001. Looking at the school board level, a national sample survey by the National School Board Association in 2010 found 44 percent of members to be female and 81 percent are white (Hess and Meeks 2010). In the GMCL study, women of color constituted 39 percent of the nation's nonwhite school board members, but only 18 percent of the nation's non-white county commissioners or supervisors, in 2007. Thus, no matter when and where one looks, it remains the case that historical legacies of exclusion and discrimination have helped to create gender gaps in the officeholding of women, and all women seeking office must confront this legacy. The task for contemporary scholars has been to understand the factors that explain the gaps' persistence and endurance.

Explaining gender gaps: An intersectional, structural, contextual, and local approach

Although the political system historically and systematically excluded women, scholars interested in explaining the persistence of the gender gaps in contemporary times have often looked to individual-level factors for an explanation. For example, a significant amount of early work on the gender gap initially focused on studying the thesis of the eligibility pool, which posited that few women served in office because few women possessed the professional credentials to do so (Burrell and Frederick 2007; Clark 1991; Fox and Lawless 2010b; Niven 1998; Rule 1981; 1990; Welch 1978; 2008). However, as women entered professional fields, the gender gap persisted, prompting scholars to examine women's levels of political ambition as the possible culprit behind the durability of the gender gap. For example, Fox and Lawless (2005; 2011) draw on national survey data from individuals occupying professions that often precede a political career and find that women are more likely to view themselves as underqualified for a career in politics, compared to similarly situated men. The result is that fewer women emerge as candidates than men,

which in turn helps to explain the persistence of the gender gap in political officeholding.

The authors note that because nascent political ambition comes before any candidate faces the political opportunity structure, that political ambition in and of itself has an impact on the emergence of women as candidates (Fox and Lawless 2005; 2011). However, although many women may perceive themselves as less qualified to run for public office than similarly situated men, some women nevertheless do choose to take the plunge. The women who do choose to run for office therefore must make strategic considerations about their candidacies based on the political opportunity structure before them. It follows that these women may be more sensitive to structural and contextual arrangements in the political opportunity structure than their male counterparts who are likewise considering a career in politics. Thus, they may be more likely to emerge as candidates and subsequently hold office under institutional arrangements or contextual settings perceived as more women friendly. The perceived openness of the political opportunity structure may also be a particularly important strategic consideration for women of color because they confront a history of exclusion from political officeholding that is racial and gendered. Thus, if women of color are more likely to perceive certain structural and contextual arrangements as more open to their candidacies, we would expect the levels of women of color winning and holding office to vary with the type of political opportunity structure in place.

However, to date we know little about the officeholding of women of color (but see Carroll and Strimling 1983; Darcy and Hadley 1988; Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey 1993; Jennings 1991; Lien and Swain 2013; Moncrief, Thompson, and Schuman 1991; Scola 2006). Indeed, the small share of women of color holding elective office, as illustrated in the numbers provided earlier, indicates that much of the research on women's officeholding implicitly relies on the experiences of white women. These findings in turn suggest a need for an intersectional approach to better understand the diverse phenomenon of women's officeholding. Intersectionality offers the benefit of being able to move us beyond the political analyses of identity politics that bind people as a group based on uniform experiences as being *either* racially targeted *or* gender targeted (Hancock 2007). Instead, intersectionality views categories of oppression, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, as interactive and mutually constitutive. Intersectionality as an analytic framework leads to a shift from identity politics' unidimensional understanding of political experience to a more complex understanding of difference and power (Dhamoon 2011). In doing so, intersectionality allows us to move beyond the essentializing of political experience (Smooth 2010).

Rather than focusing on political leadership in a *woman's* experience, or more accurately a white woman's experience, intersectionality acknowledges that focusing on white women ignores that there is more than one way to

experience political leadership. Scholars who rely on race and gender as discreet lines of inquiry miss much of the dynamism of intersectional politics and in doing so ultimately limit the production of knowledge (Smooth 2006). Because much of the research on descriptive representation has focused on *either* race *or* gender as categories of oppression, our understanding of women's and minorities' descriptive representation has largely been confined to the experiences of white women and Black men. An intersectional approach begins to move us toward an examination of the ways in which intersecting identities produce experiences in political officeholding that differ from the dominant group (Smooth 2010).

To address the concerns mentioned above, the study presented here examines the officeholding of women of color at the local level. We choose to examine local officeholding because the lion's share of work on the gender gaps has been conducted at the state and congressional levels. This inattention to local politics is problematic, for a significant portion of the nation's political activities occur at the local level, which is where the vast majority of elected officials reside (Trounstine 2009, 612). The diversity of structural and contextual arrangements at the local level can also provide greater analytical leverage into what role variations in the political opportunity structure play in the officeholding of women of color. In particular, we pay attention to three prominent structural and contextual variables thought to impact the officeholding of women of color: type of local office, electoral arrangements, and demographic features. Because of women's systematic exclusion from politics, particularly at the state and national levels, we offer this general observation: Women of color may perceive officeholding at the local level as more accessible than at a higher level, but the presence of women in local offices may vary by the type of office, the officeholder's race, type of electoral arrangement, and demographic features of the district.

Type of local office

Scholars interested in the effect institutional variations may have on the descriptive representation of women and men of color have posited that factors increasing the attractiveness of an elective office may have a depressing effect on the descriptive representation of these two groups. For example, elected bodies that are more professional, have fewer seats, pay higher salaries, are granted more policymaking authority, or that are more prestigious might be perceived as less open to women in general and women of color in particular. This is due to the fact that such offices are likely sites of intense and competitive campaigns that are off-putting to women because, as studies have shown, women are more risk averse than men (Byrnes, Miller, and

Schafer 1999) and are less likely to seek out competitive environments (Gneezy, Niederle, and Rustichini 2003; Niederle and Vesterlund 2007; 2010).

At the local level, school boards may be viewed as a less desirable office than county and city offices, and thus women may perceive that a seat on the school board is more accessible and a candidacy more worth the risk. In addition, the job description may also make school boards appear more accessible to women because of the perception that education is an extension of motherhood (MacManus et al. 2006). This perception could in turn enhance women's evaluations of their credentials. Indeed, Deckman (2004) finds that female board members were more likely than their male counterparts to report their decisions to run were prompted by their having children in local schools while both men and women reported social and community reasons as important to their decision to run. Neither group saw the office as a political stepping stone.

How an office is structured may also make it appear more or less accessible to women and minorities. For example, it is possible that different institutional designs have different amounts of "gender appropriate" offices available to women, and this may explain why the form of county government has a positive and significant relationship to the kinds of offices female councilors hold (DeSantis and Renner 1992, 150). Indeed, MacManus (1996, 66) argues that one of the reasons fewer women serve on county boards than in other types of local office has to do with the fairly widespread idea among women that counties deal mainly with roads, bridges, and jails and are dominated by old boys' contractor networks. Lublin and Brewer (2003) likewise speculate that certain political offices, particularly at the county level, may be more easily identifiable with traditional gender roles. For example, voters may view the position of county sheriff as a masculine position while viewing offices that perform more clerk-like functions, such as county assessor, as more "appropriate" for women. The authors test this idea using logit analyses on county election returns from 1979 to 1999, and their findings suggest that gender norms play a crucial role in determining the gender of the holders of different types of office (Lublin and Brewer 2003, 389). Women are more likely to hold clerkship offices, and this pattern holds regardless of constituency characteristics (Lublin and Brewer 2003, 390).

Furthermore, DeSantis and Renner (1992, 149–50) report that county government form itself has a positive and significant impact on the representation of female councilors, but they do not report a similar significant impact on the proportion of Blacks serving on those councils. MacManus (1996, 70) similarly finds the highest proportions of women to serve on county boards with a council administrator form, followed by council-executive form, and lastly a commission form. However, she also finds higher proportions of Black commissioners in counties with larger boards and simultaneous council terms. Yet none of these structures are found to relate

as strongly to Black representation as the size of the Black population itself. At the city level, MacManus and Bullock (1999) find more female mayors serving on city councils when the mayor is chosen by the council and that women mayors are more likely when there is a higher proportion of women serving on the council (182). Likewise, the authors find that minorities have been somewhat more likely to achieve their mayoral positions when they are selected by council members than are whites (MacManus and Bullock 1999, 190). Marschall and Ruhil (2006) meanwhile find that council-manager city governments are more likely to elect a Black mayor than council-mayor forms.

A political institution's structural design may make it appear more or less accessible and in turn have some impact on the election of women of all colors and nonwhite men into that institution, though the effect is seemingly more pronounced for (white) women. Why this occurs is not entirely clear. It may have to do with the number of available gender "appropriate" or gender "friendly" offices in the case of women. This leads us to make the following observation that structural variations within local level of offices may make these offices appear variously accessible to women of color, with county offices being seen as the least accessible and seats on school boards being seen as the most accessible. However, where we find women of color locally may also vary by the officeholder's race, type of electoral arrangement, and demographic features of the district.

Electoral systems

Electoral systems are another prominent structural variable that may diminish or enhance the accessibility of political office for women of color. In particular, women may perceive multimember districts (MMD) as more accessible than single-member districts because winning in a single-member district system is zero-sum. In multimember districts, however, multiple candidates can win. The fact that multiple candidates can win may allow for collaboration and teamwork among candidates of the same party and allow for more positive campaigning (Representation 2020, 2014). Given that women are more risk averse than men and more leery of negative campaigning (Fox and Lawless 2011), MMD systems in which multiple players can win may be an especially attractive electoral arrangement to women contemplating a run for office. It follows that women constitute a greater proportion of state legislators in states that use some form of MMD (Arceneaux 2001; Sanbonmatsu 2002). Rule (1992) and Saint-Germain (1992) likewise provide evidence at the state level that MMD benefits the election of women.

However, others argue that MMD dilutes the representation of concentrated racial minorities and that more proportional representation can be achieved through the creation of majority-minority opportunity single-

member districts (Larimer 2005). A minority candidate running against two white candidates in a two-seat, mostly white district is likely to lose. However, in a majority-minority district, a minority candidate has a greater chance of winning office. Indeed, Moncrief and Thompson (1992) find that SMD benefits Blacks, particularly urban Blacks, and that women are more frequently elected from MMD, particularly urban MMD.

Women of color, who sit at the intersection of race and gender, may benefit from MMD particularly when used in areas with high concentrations of a minority group. Suspecting the potential interactive effects of demographic and electoral contexts, Darcy, Welch, and Clark (1994) argue that the fact that Black women are more likely to achieve office in MMD systems may be an artifact of the tendency of the SMD systems to cover areas with significant Black voting populations. Thus, if MMD systems are conducive for the officeholding of women in general, they may be especially helpful for the officeholding of women of color if used in areas with high concentrations of Blacks or Latinos. Indeed, Darcy, Welch, and Clark (1994) argue that MMD could improve the representation of Black women, without hurting the representation of Blacks in general if they are in places where there is a significant Black population (83–85).

Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey's (1993) study of the political representation of Blacks at the state and local levels similarly concludes that the underrepresentation of Blacks is due almost exclusively to the underrepresentation of Black women and that women are more likely to run successful campaigns in MMD systems than single-member district (SMD) systems. MacManus (1996) observes that counties using the at-large election method have higher proportions of women board members than those electing board members using SMD, while counties with mixed elections have the highest proportions of Black officials (67–68).

At the municipal level, Alozie (1992) finds that for Asian Americans district and mixed election systems do not differ markedly from the at-large plan in the opportunities they grant Asians for representation on the city council (96). Geron and Lai's (2002) study suggests a possible explanation for this variation. Compared to the Latinos in their study who overwhelmingly run in districts where Latinos constitute a majority of the population, the limited electoral presence of Asian American voters in most electoral districts creates a situation where Asian American political leaders must possess crossover appeal to other groups beside their own. Unable to rely on population density, Asian American candidates must foster cross-racial appeals. Thus, the survey results from Asians and Latinos at all levels of government suggest different pathways to political incorporation (Geron and Lai 2002, 72).

Trounstein and Valdin (2008) test the effects of electoral systems on representation by analyzing surveys conducted by the International City/

County Managers Association sent to city managers in 1986, 1992, 1996, and 2001. The authors find that the effects of electoral systems are not constant across all people of color, and they are also not constant across gender. District elections facilitate the election of minorities and are a nominal detriment to women. This study also shows that women do better in at-large elections (Trounstein and Valdin [2008](#), 561), though the authors argue that Black men and women are the only groups in their analysis substantively and significantly affected by electoral institutions.

More recently, Smith, Reingold, and Owen ([2011](#)) use a cross-sectional data set for all 239 cities with populations of 100,000 or more as of 2000 to measure the influence of electoral arrangements on the descriptive representation of women at the city council level. The authors find that the type of electoral arrangement a city used did not seem to influence the descriptive representation of women. This does not seem to be the case when minority representation is studied at the school board level. Most school boards use either ward/district, at-large, or appointment systems to select their officials. Earlier studies on Black representation on school boards find the at-large systems to be a hindering factor, while Blacks were able to achieve near parity in the mixed or ward systems (Arrington and Watt [1991](#); Meier and England [1984](#); Robinson and England [1981](#); Stewart, England, and Meier [1989](#)). More recent studies by England, Hirlinger, and Kirksey ([2002](#)) and Hess ([2002](#)) affirm previous findings that at-large systems are a barrier to minority representation on local school boards and that Blacks do better in district-based systems.

Findings of Latino representation on local school boards mirror those studies focusing on Black representation. Fraga, Meier, and England ([1986](#)) examine the effect of electoral institutions on Hispanic representation on local school boards using data from urban school districts with at least 5 percent Hispanic enrollment. The study results indicate that at-large and appointment systems work to reduce Hispanic representation on local school boards, and this remains true even after controlling for population size. Polinard, Wrinkle, and Longoria ([1990](#)) compare school districts in Texas that recently switched to districted elections with those that maintained at-large systems and find that those districts using ward elections have greater numbers of Hispanics serving on the school board than those using at-large systems. Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier ([2004](#)) also investigate the impact electoral institutions have on Latino representation on local school boards. Leal, Martinez, and Meier ([2004](#)) argue that when Latinos are a minority of the population, both ward and at-large systems systematically underrepresent Latinos, though in at-large systems more so than ward systems (1,235).

The preceding discussion leads us to conclude that, on balance, electoral institutions matter. However, they appear to matter more for nonwhite men than for women of all colors. Majority-minority single-member districts seem to help increase Black and Latino representation, and this finding is

generally stable across levels of elective office. Nevertheless, the gains in representation are primarily attributable to male members of those communities. It is not surprising then, that these districts are thought to reduce the representation of women, including women of color, though the effect of SMDs on women's representation does not appear to be great. SMDs seem to hold little promise of increasing the political representation of women of all colors, while MMDs might help increase the representation of women of color especially if used in areas with significant proportions of nonwhites (Darcy, Hadley, and Kirksey 1993). Thus, we surmise that women of color may perceive MMDs as more accessible to their candidacies and thus may produce more women of color elected officials than their male counterparts in all types of local office. Conversely, because of differing perceptions about the accessibility of the political opportunity structure, SMD may produce more nonwhite male elected officials than nonwhite female elected officials.

Demographic context

The literature reviewed so far indicates that demographic features are an important contextual factor that may influence how accessible nonwhite women believe an office to be. In particular, offices in localities with significant minority populations may appear to be more accessible to nonwhite candidates because they face an electorate less likely to view them negatively on the basis of their race. This may be particularly important for nonwhite women who sit at the intersection of race and gender. Grofman and Handley's (1989, 275) discussion of Black representation across different levels of government suggests, for example, that the South has higher levels of Black representation because the South has a far higher proportion of units of local governance coupled with a large Black population. MacManus's (1996) review of county governments indicates that counties with higher proportions of Blacks and Hispanics also have higher proportions of Black and Hispanic commissioners. In their study of county level officeholding, Hardy-Fanta and colleagues (2006, 27) find that Black, Latino, and Asian women represent counties that are overall less nonwhite than those represented by their male counterparts.

At the municipal level, DeSantis and Renner (1992) control for a host of demographic variables in their regression analysis of the impact electoral systems have on minority representation. They find that county education level and Black population proportion have a positive, statistically significant effect on the equity of Black representation of county councils (148). Marschall and Ruhil (2006) study 309 cities in 40 states over a 30-year period in an effort to explain why some cities elect Black mayors, while others do not. Using a pooled-probit model, the authors find that the racial context of the city appears to be the most crucial determinant of a Black mayoral

candidate's success. Persons (2007) likewise finds that there generally continues to be a disproportionate reliance on the Black vote to elect a Black mayor because roughly 60 percent of Black mayor cities in 1990 and 2000 had a Black population of at least 40 percent (74).

Hardy-Fanta and colleagues (2006) also find that a majority of minority municipal officials serve in places that are majority-minority, yet they also find significant differences by race/ethnicity and gender. While both Black and Latino municipal officials serve in places with large Black and Latino populations, respectively, Asian municipal officials serve in places where about one-quarter of the population is Asian. Asian municipal officials also serve in areas with much higher median incomes and higher levels of college graduates (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2006, 30–31). The authors' most striking finding for the municipal level is that differences of race/ethnicity overshadow those based on gender (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2006, 31).

Leal, Martinez-Ebers, and Meier (2004) provide evidence that population density is also related to Latino representation on school boards. Applying regression analysis on a nationwide survey of school boards representing 55,000 or more students demonstrates that increasing the Latino population also increases Latino representation on school boards (1,232). Hardy-Fanta and colleagues (2006) find a pattern similar to what is seen at the state and city levels whereby Latino elected officials serving on local school boards serve in areas that are heavily Latino, which is in contrast to school boards served by Asian members. School boards with Asian American members have only about 22 percent Asian students in contrast to 73 percent Latino students in districts of Latino school board members (Hardy-Fanta et al. 2006, 31).

As Carroll (2009) notes of the 2008 presidential election, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama had to run campaigns attentive to obstacles that white male candidates do not have to confront. Clinton's campaign was constrained and affected by gender bias just as Obama's was by racism (Carroll 2009). Women of color confront both biases, and areas with large concentrations of nonwhites or coethnics can help to ease the racial bias that confronts their candidacies. It follows that women of color may therefore perceive offices located in areas with a larger minority population as more accessible. Conversely, research on Latino state legislators shows that women of color in leadership positions may leverage their intersectional identities to actively build electoral coalitions across race and gender groups (Fraga et al. 2008). Their strategic intersectionality may enable them to appeal to a broader constituency base than coethnics. Thus, some women of color may not need as high a proportion of coethnics or nonwhites to gain locally elected offices than men of color.

On the basis of the preceding review, we make the following observation that women of color may perceive offices in localities with significant minority populations to be more accessible to women of color. Black women and

Latinas may represent districts that are majority-minority but not Asian American women. Although women of color confront intersecting modes of oppression and their officeholding may be associated with a larger minority population than their male colleagues, there may be situations when they are better able to leverage their intersectional identities than their male counterparts in winning elective offices.

Data and analysis

Data

This study uses data from the Gender and Multicultural Leadership (GMCL) survey, which is a multistage, stratified telephone survey of the nation's nonwhite elected officials holding state and local offices across the 50 states of America. The GMCL database from which the survey sample was drawn is compiled by the project team from various national rosters of elected officials in the Black, Latino, and Asian American communities and with information on American Indians from the National Conference of State Legislators.¹ The database contains information on the population of Black, Latino, and Asian American male and female elected officials serving at subnational offices as state legislators, county commissioners, mayors or city/town council members, and local school board members in spring 2006. Computer-assisted telephone interviews were conducted by the survey center affiliated with the University of New Mexico between June 5, 2006, and March 21, 2007. The elite interview protocol includes at least 10 attempts per number, respondent appointment tracking and follow-up, and reluctant respondent persuasion. In the event the eligible respondent from the list-based component was not at a particular number, interviewers tried to acquire a valid number for the designated point of contact. Upon request, survey center staff faxed and/or emailed a general study description to potential participants in an attempt to validate the study. As a result, the survey team achieves a respectable cooperation rate of 77 percent.

The resultant sample represents 13.5 percent of the nation's total number of 10,066 nonwhite elected officials serving at the subnational levels in the GMCL database as of spring 2006. Among the 1,359 valid cases of survey respondents, over half are Blacks (54 percent); close to two in five are Latinos (38 percent); the rest are Asians (7 percent) and American Indian/Alaska Natives (AIAN, 2 percent).² This distribution resembles the 59 percent of Black and 37 percent of Latino elected officials found in the database, but the shares of Asian (3.4 percent) and AIAN (0.4 percent) officials are lower than those found in the database due to the oversampling of these two populations in the survey. Close to half (47 percent) of these elected officials in the survey hold positions at the municipal level, one-quarter (26 percent) at the school

board level, one in six (16 percent) at the county level, and one-tenth (11 percent) hold positions at the state legislative level of governance. The shares of municipal officials (48 percent) and state legislators (9 percent) in the database are within two percentage points of what is found in survey. However, the share of county officials (10 percent) in the database is lower and that of school board members (32 percent) is higher than in the survey. Over one in three survey respondents are women of color (37 percent), which is higher than the 32 percent found in the database. The share of women at 42 percent for Black and AIAN officials, respectively, in the survey is significantly higher than the 34 percent for Blacks and 19 percent for AIANs in the database, while the shares of women at 31 percent for Latinos and 33 percent for Asians in the survey are much closer to those found in the population of 29 percent and 28 percent, respectively. Below, we discuss selected findings from the GMCL database and survey to explore the relationship between race, gender, type of office, electoral systems, and demographics among locally elected officials of color.

Analysis and results

On type of office, we expect school boards to be most accessible, while county offices to be least accessible, to women of color seeking local offices. Data presented in [Table 1](#) are consistent with this expectation. Analyzed by race, Black, Asian, and Latina women all experience their highest levels of officeholding at the school board level at rates more than two to one, compared to county officeholding. Municipal officeholding falls between county and school board levels for all three groups of women.

[Table 2](#) lends support to the growing body of evidence in the literature that the MMD system of elections facilitates the election of nonwhite women.

Table 1. Gender distribution by level of office and race (among the GMCL population).

	All	County	Municipality	School Board
<i>N</i>	9,182	1,046	4,864	3,272
% Female	32	18	31	39
–among Blacks	34	18	33	44
–among Latinos	29	16	25	36
–among Asians	27	17	21	35

Source: Gender and Multicultural Leadership Database 2006.

Table 2. Gender and election system by level of office (in the GMCL survey).

% Female	County	Municipality	School Board
–Single Member District	24	33	48
–At-Large	16	32	47
–Multimember District	28	47	47

Source: Gender and Multicultural Leadership Survey, 2006–07.

The MMD system outperforms at-large and SMD systems at the county and municipal level and performs equally well as these systems at the school board level. The comparability in electoral system performance at the school board level may be due to the greater accessibility of school boards in general.³

Table 3 examines the relationship between electoral system, gender, race, and level of office. We find that, with the exception of Blacks and Asians at the school board level, MMD is the only electoral arrangement where women do better than men regardless of race and type of office. On balance, the results of the analysis suggest that MMD facilitates the officeholding of nonwhite women and performs better for women than men. When we examine the performance of SMD, we find the results are mixed. At the county level, SMD has no discernible relationship to the election of Black women and men, but it appears to benefit Latinas vis-à-vis their male counterparts. SMD favors Black and Asian men, compared to their female counterparts at the municipal level, but SMD has no discernible relationship to the election of Latinas and Latinos. The opposite is true at the school board level. Black and Asian women do better under SMD than their male counterparts while Latinas fare worse than Latinos. Although more analyses at the geographic place level and more contextual factors are needed to help disentangle the mixed patterns of relationships reported above, the inconsistent findings serve to highlight

Table 3. Election system by race, gender, and office at the local level.

Election System	All		Black		Latino		Asian	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
All Local Offices								
<i>N</i>	420	714	258	369	137	299	25	46
% in Single Member District	36	39	42	47	27	31	24	22
% in At-Large	40	42	32	31	50	53	56	70
% in Multimember District	24	19	26	22	23	16	20	9
County								
<i>N</i>	48	153	37	107	10	44	1	2
% in Single Member District	60	58	60	61	60	50	na	na
% in At-Large	12	20	14	15	10	32	na	na
% in Multimember District	27	22	27	24	30	18	na	na
Municipality								
<i>N</i>	210	381	150	199	47	155	13	27
% in Single Member District	30	33	33	40	23	24	8	30
% in At-Large	45	51	40	41	53	62	69	70
% in Multimember District	26	16	27	19	23	14	23	0
School Board								
<i>N</i>	161	180	71	63	80	100	10	17
% in Single Member District	37	36	52	48	25	34	30	6
% in At-Large	41	46	25	25	54	48	50	71
% in Multimember District	22	22	22	27	21	18	20	24

Source: Gender and Multicultural Leadership Survey 2006–07.

the importance of the need to deconstruct terms such as “local” and “minorities” from the perspective of intersectionality to help advance understanding of the variations in the accessibility of different local elective offices for separate groups of women of color.

The literature review suggests that demographic features are important to the officeholding of women of color. Table 4 examines the demographic characteristics of nonwhite elected officials’ districts at the municipal level. We find that municipal elected officials of color serve in jurisdictions where non-Latino whites do not constitute a majority of the population—supporting the hypothesis that minority population share is an important factor in the officeholding of nonwhite elected officials. This finding holds true regardless of the electoral system in use. The one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests of difference in means show that relationships between electoral system and the size and proportion of each race in jurisdictions are all statistically significant. However, when analyzed by gender (not shown), we find that relationships between electoral system and percent Black, percent Latino, percent Asian, and percent white are significant for men but not for women of color. In addition, with the exception of the at-large electoral system, women of color, under single-member and multimember district systems come from smaller cities than their nonwhite male colleagues. However, size of municipality does not reach statistical significance for either women or men.

Table 4. Percentage distribution of racial composition in municipalities^a with municipal elected officials of color by election system.

	District	At-large	Multimember District	All
<i>N</i>	182	289	114	585
Size of municipality	165,998	51,892	67,123	90,360
% Black	32	27	37	31
% Latino	18	28	19	23
% Asian	4	5	2	4
% Non-Latino White	45	39	41	42

Source: Gender and Multicultural Leadership Survey 2006–07.

Note. ^aCity, town, or place in the 2000 Census. *One-way ANOVA tests of difference in means are significant for each row at .05 level.

Table 5. Percentage distribution of racial composition in municipalities^a with Black municipal elected officials by election system.

Gender	Blacks in Municipality		District		At-large		Multimember District	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
<i>N</i>	149	197	49	78	60	81	40	38
Size of municipality	81,692	89,823	139,735	177,360	71,952	26,585	25,200	44,939
% Black ^b	53	45	45	43	56	47	58	44
% Latino	5	6	5	6	5	6	3	7
% Asian	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	1
% Non-Latino White ^b	41	46	48	49	38	43	37	48

Source and Note. ^aSee Table 4. ^bOne-way ANOVA tests of difference in means are significant at .05 level among Black female but not Black male officials.

Table 5 examines this relationship further for Blacks by factoring in gender. Black women face arguably the most severe forms of oppression (Collins 1990), and this experience may factor in their the calculations of the accessibility of the office. Cities with a large Black or nonwhite population may help Black women overcome the dual barriers of race and gender by providing them with a solid ethnic bloc of votes. When we examine the relationship between electoral systems and demographics for Blacks, including gender, we find that Black women are serving in municipalities with higher proportions of Blacks than their male colleagues. The findings here suggest that demographics might be more important for Black women than Black men, because Black women must overcome racial and gender barriers. Indeed, the relationship between electoral system and percent Black or percent white in a jurisdiction is significant for Black women but not for Black men. The relationship between electoral system and size of municipality, percent Latino, and percent Asian is not significant for either Black women or Black men.

When we examine the situation of Latinos, **Table 6** shows that, for both men and women, officeholders are coming from municipalities where Latinos constitute a plurality of the population. Importantly, and unlike Black women, Latinas are elected from jurisdictions with fewer Latinos in the population than their male counterparts. This finding suggests support for the viability of strategic intersectionality as a thesis to help explain the phenomenon of Latina officeholding. We also find the relationship between electoral system and size of municipality is significant for Latina women but not for Latino men. However, the relationship between electoral system and percent white is significant for Latino men but not for Latina women. This last result suggests, again, that Latinas may be better positioned to exercise strategic intersectionality by making crossover appeals to Anglo voters than their male counterparts. None of the other relationships in this table achieve statistical significance.

Table 6. Percentage distribution of racial composition in municipalities^a with Latino municipal elected officials by election system.

Gender	Latinos in Municipality		District		At-large		Multimember District	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
<i>N</i>	46	153	11	35	24	96	11	22
Size of municipality ^b	47,135	97,084	119,034	137,770	32,574	54,891	7,008	216,469
% Black	4	5	4	5	5	5	3	7
% Latino	48	57	57	50	48	60	42	57
% Asian	3	3	3	2	4	4	1	2
% Non-Latino White ^c	42	33	31	42	42	31	50	31

Source and Note. ^aSee Table 4. ^bOne-way ANOVA tests of difference in means are significant at .05 level among Latina female officials. ^cOne-way ANOVA tests of difference in means are significant at .05 level among Latino male officials.

Last but not least, we analyze through logistic regression modeling whether electoral arrangement or racial identity or constituency characteristics by race can better explain the incidence of women of color in municipal offices. The “All” model in Table 7 shows that, using variables discussed in the preceding tables, women of color municipal officials are more likely to come from MMD systems, everything else being equal. When only Black officials are included in the model, we find that MMD systems alone is again the most useful variable in predicting the incidence of Black women serving in municipal offices. Nevertheless, instead of being 95 percent certain, we can only be 90 percent certain that the relationship cannot happen by chance. When only Latino officials are included in the model, the MMD systems is no longer significant in and by itself in predicting the incidence of Latina women in municipal offices—suggesting that the relationship observed earlier for all women of color is driven largely by what happens among Black officials. None of the other variables in the multivariate models can independently reach statistical significance. This result suggests that, everything else being equal, the election of minority officials to municipal offices is not necessarily enhanced or impaired by the racial characteristics in their jurisdictions. The negative signs associated with the coefficients for racial characteristics in the Latino model also suggests that the negative coefficients of percent Asian, percent Latino, and percent Anglo in jurisdictions in the “All” model are largely driven by the relationship of Latinos to these demographic factors.

Table 7. Logistic regression prediction of electing women of color to office among nonwhite municipal officials.

	All (N = 639)		Black (N = 378)		Latino (N = 218)	
	b/s.e.	sig.	b/s.e.	sig.	b/s.e.	sig.
Racial Identity (Ref = Asian)						
Black	-.0018/0.505	0.972				
Latino	-0.009/0.502	0.986				
Election system (Ref = SMD)						
At-large system	0.014/0.194	0.942	0.143/0.242	0.553	-0.375/0.373	0.315
Multimember District	0.526/0.239	0.028	0.491/0.284	0.084	0.249/0.474	0.600
% Race in Jurisdiction (Census Place)						
Black	0.000/0.017	0.998	0.019/0.024	0.410	-0.037/0.031	0.243
Asian	-0.006/0.022	0.780	0.017/0.052	0.743	-0.032/0.040	0.431
Latino	-0.018/0.017	0.293	-0.014/0.028	0.606	-0.030/0.026	0.238
Non-Hispanic White	-0.006/0.017	0.721	0.013/0.024	0.587	-0.016/0.026	0.529
Size of Constituent Population (Census Place)	0.000/0.000	0.619	0.000/0.000	0.592	0.000/0.000	0.383
Constant	-0.010/1.75	.996	-1.94/2.37	0.413	1.57/2.51	0.532
% predicted correct	66.0		61.1		76.1	
-2 Log Likelihood	795.77		503.7		231.6	
Nagelkerke R-sq	0.077		0.042		0.068	

Source and Note. ^aSee Table 4. b = unstandardized logistic regression coefficients, s.e. = standard errors. All = Black, Latino, and Asian women.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this analysis indicate that elements in the political opportunity structure can help explain gender gaps in local elective officeholding. Individual factors, such as political ambition and personal qualifications, are important lines of inquiry that have helped to shed light on the causes of persistent gender gaps found in elective officeholding, yet the results of the analysis presented here suggest that institutional and contextual factors regarding the political structure also play a role in influencing calculations of the accessibility to office. This may be because some women might perceive some elements in the political opportunity structures as more favorable to their campaigns and elections than other elements. This may be particularly true regarding the factor of electoral institutions. In light of these findings we call for greater interrogation of elements in the political structure that may cause women to second-guess a run for office and thus perpetuate the exclusion of women from officeholding into the 21st century. While certain contextual variables can help women of color overcome structural barriers, it remains the case that structural barriers continue to systematically exclude women of color from elective offices as they have throughout the nation's history. Future research may want to examine more elements in the institutional and contextual political opportunity structure that reduce the likelihood of women's running for and holding political offices, for they may help change the accessibility calculations and challenge the perpetuation of male dominance and improve the representativeness of American democracy at the level that touches citizens most directly, the local level. Removing barriers in the political opportunity structure that impede the election of women of all colors is essential to bringing about a democratic politics centered on empowerment rather than exclusion.

The data presented here suggest that women of color are most likely to hold office on the school board and that may be because the structural features of school board offices may make them appear to be the most open and accessible to women's officeholding among the types of local office examined. Beyond the institutional design of the type of office, the local electoral system can also make a difference in the opportunities of political officeholding for women of color. Multimember districts perform better than SMDs for electing women of color, and the MMD system is the only electoral arrangement that performs better for women than men. MMD also works best for women of color in all types of office under consideration. Moreover, demographic features can help overcome the structural barriers women of color confront as they seek elective office. The analysis reveals that Black and Latino elected officials come from cities with large minority populations. This is particularly true for Black women who hold municipal offices in cities with higher proportions of Blacks in the population than their male

counterparts. A large Black population may help Black women overcome the intersecting modes of oppression of race and gender that blocks their descriptive representation. In contrast, Latinas come from cities with smaller proportions of Latinos than their male counterparts, suggesting that race may be less of a barrier for Latina women than Black women seeking local elective offices. This is because Latina women serve in offices that have higher concentrations of whites than their Black female counterparts. More research is needed, however, to explore the underpinning factors behind the racialized and gendered differences in officeholding.

Finally, it is important to note that because of the small number of Asian American women holding elective offices, we are unable to perform the same kind of analysis on Asian American women as we can for Black women and Latinas. However, it is likely that Asian Americans confront many of the same individual level misgivings about their credentials for office as their Black and Latina counterparts (Chu 1989; Ong 2003). Thus, Asian American women may also factor these self-evaluations into the accessibility or inaccessibility of popularly elected offices. For example, Judy Chu, the first Chinese American woman elected to Congress, has reflected on how cultural and societal factors may play into the calculations of Asian American women to run for office, even at the local level (Chu 1989). She notes that factors, such as self-doubt, a lack of role models, lack of encouragement, and gender and racial stereotypes, can inhibit Asian American women from running. She goes on to note that issue-based community activism, active mentoring, and childhood leadership experience could help change women's perceptions of their qualifications for office. Doing so may spur women to envision the political opportunity structure as more accessible and open to their aspirations for empowerment.

Notes

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2. AIAN stands for American Indian and Alaskan Native. Because of the lack of a national directory of American Indian elected officials, we rely on a national roster of state legislators released by the National Council of State Legislators in 2006 to prepare our database of American Indians. Because of this limitation, we excluded AIAN officials from our data analysis.
3. Although at-large and MMD can overlap, the data here come from survey responses that are mutually exclusive. Those who checked MMD are not from one at-large district but from plural MMDs.

Notes on contributors

Katie E. O. Swain recently completed her dissertation in political science at the University of California Santa Barbara. Her research adds to our knowledge of race neutrality by examining how some facially “race-neutral” policies can advance the substantive belonging of ethnoracially disadvantaged groups by fostering broad-based social justice coalitions. Her dissertation also explores how other facially “race-neutral” policies can work against the substantive belonging of ethnoracially disadvantaged groups. Namely, the apparent “neutrality” of these policies masks their anti-transformative racial agendas, which makes them appear consistent with norms of egalitarianism. She is currently teaching courses in American Politics at the University of California Santa Barbara.

Pei-te Lien is a professor and graduate advisor of political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her primary research interest is the political participation and representation of Asian and other nonwhite Americans. Most of her recent publications examine the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, and nativity in political behavior of the elite and the mass in the United States. She is currently working on a book manuscript with her co-PIs of the Gender and Multicultural Leadership project. Her other book project deals with comparative homeland socialization through citizenship education in East Asia.

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